Being born earlier

Anthony Brueckner & John Martin Fischer

To cite this article: Anthony Brueckner & John Martin Fischer (1998) Being born earlier, , 76:1, 110-114, DOI: 10.1080/00048409812348251

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00048409812348251

Published online: 02 Jun 2006.
Hallie once pointed out to me that people worry a lot more about the eternity after their deaths than the eternity that happened before they were born. But it's the same amount of infinity, rolling out in all directions from where we stand.\textsuperscript{1}

According to the deprivation account of the badness of death, death is bad (when it is bad) because it deprives one of goods that one would have possessed had one died later. However, if one had been born earlier, then one equally would have possessed goods that one did not in fact possess. So the deprivation account seems to imply that one ought to have symmetric attitudes towards the period of one's prenatal nonexistence and the period of one's post-mortem nonexistence. Both periods appear to constitute periods of deprivation, and thus the deprivation account seems to imply that one ought to regret that one was not born earlier. But since it seems to be perfectly rational for one to adopt asymmetric attitudes towards the periods, the deprivation account has a problem.

Frederik Kaufman attempts to solve this problem for the deprivation account by reviving Thomas Nagel's claim that, whereas one could have died at a later time than that of one's actual death, one could not have been born earlier.\textsuperscript{2} Such an asymmetry in one's possibilities would explain why it is rational not to regard prenatal nonexistence as a period of deprivation that ought to be regretted: one cannot be deprived of that which it is not even possible (in the broadly logical sense) for one to possess.

Kaufman's defence of the deprivation account focuses upon the claim that psychological continuity is the basis for personal identity. In this paper, we shall argue that this claim goes no way toward showing that one could not have been born earlier. We shall argue, therefore, that Kaufman has failed to explain one's asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and postmortem nonexistence.

Nagel's claim that one could not have been born earlier was denied by many writers, sometimes on Kripkean grounds. Some writers maintained that one could have been born earlier in virtue of one's actual genetic material coming into being earlier than it actually did.\textsuperscript{3} Kaufman maintains that this line of thought is at odds with an approach that takes psychological continuity to be the basis for personal identity. Kaufman says,

\textsuperscript{2} Kaufman's paper is 'Death and Deprivation; Or Why Lucretius' Symmetry Argument Fails', \textit{Australasian Journal of Philosophy} 74 (1996). Nagel's discussion is in 'Death', reprinted in \textit{Mortal Questions} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Kaufman's grounds for denying that one could have been born earlier are quite different from Nagel's.
To argue that because some biological feature of a particular human being could exist earlier, a person could therefore exist earlier, and still be the same person who exists now, is to ignore the relevant feature of persons in this context. [p. 308]

The relevant feature, according to Kaufman, is psychological continuity. Kaufman never offers an account of what such continuity consists in, but some rudimentary elements of an account will be needed to evaluate Kaufman’s claims. Let us suppose that psychological continuity is a relation among temporally distinct person-stages, a relation that can be defined in terms of psychological connections between stages. One example of such a connection involves memory: two stages are psychologically connected if one contains a memory of some experience contained in the other. Another example is the connection holding between a stage containing an intention and a stage in which that intention is carried out in action. Another example: two stages each contain a belief with the same content, where the persistence of the belief between stages is explained by some appropriate causal relation between them. Psychological continuity is the ancestral of the psychological connectedness relation. That is, two stages are psychologically continuous if and only if they are psychologically connected or linked by stages that are so connected. In order to simplify the discussion somewhat, we will sometimes attribute psychological continuity derivatively to psychological states that are contained in stages that are psychologically continuous.

Let us consider life-long New Jersey resident Mary. Let ‘M’ denote the actual sequence of person-stages that constitute Mary’s life history, starting with her birth at t1 and ending with her death at t2. According to the psychological theorist of personal identity, the members of M are bound together by the relation of psychological continuity. Kaufman would ask us to try to imagine Mary having been born ten years earlier than t1, say in Majorca. The members of M contain no memories of any pre-t1 psychological states. It is safe to say that none of the Majorcan psychological states that we (try to) imagine Mary having when we (try to) imagine her earlier birth is contained in a stage psychologically continuous with an actually existing member of M.

But this is hardly surprising. And there is no ground here for an asymmetry between earlier birth and later death. Kaufman has, it seems, mixed up actuality and possibility in a certain way.

To explain. When we imagine Mary and her pre-t1 Majorcan experiences, we are imagining a possible world distinct from the actual world. This possible world contains a myriad of merely possible, non-actual experiences and other merely possible, non-actual psychological states—i.e., experiences and other psychological states that might have existed, but never did in fact exist. None of these merely possible, non-actual states is psychologically continuous with any actually existing psychological state. This is because no merely possible, non-actual psychological state is causally related to any actually existing psychological state. It may well be true that a given merely possible, non-actual state (e.g., a non-actual memory m) might have been psychologically continuous with a

---

4 One can explicate psychological continuity in a way that is similar to what follows in the text without using the notion of a person stage. See Derek Parfit’s Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

5 Kaufman uses the terms ‘psychological continuity’ and ‘psychological connectedness’ interchangeably. It is not obvious what meanings he attaches to the terms.
given actually existing experience \(e\). For example, it may well be true that \(m\) might have been causally related to \(e\) in the way required for memory. And it may well be that the truth conditions of such a modal claim involve the experience \(e\) itself, and not some counterpart of \(e\).\(^6\) Still, no merely possible, non-actual psychological state is \textit{in fact} causally related to any actually existing psychological state, and hence no merely possible, non-actual psychological state is \textit{in fact} psychologically continuous with any actually existing psychological state. This is why no merely possible, pre-t1 Majorcan experience of Mary's is psychologically continuous with any actually existing state of hers.\(^7\)

Exactly parallel points hold regarding a thought experiment in which we imagine Mary dying ten years later than t2. We imagine a possible world distinct from the actual world in which, say, Mary has ten years' worth of post-t2, New Jersey-based psychological states. None of these merely possible, non-actual psychological states is psychologically continuous with any actually existing psychological state (though some \textit{might have been} continuous with an actually existing state). In particular, none of these merely possible psychological states is psychologically continuous with any of Mary's actually existing states (though some \textit{might have been} continuous with an actually existing state of Mary's). None of them, for example, is a memory of Mary's actual experience of her 5th birthday party (though some merely possible state \textit{might have been} such a memory). Thus there is no asymmetry in respect of psychological continuity regarding merely possible psychological states occurring before t1 (in their world) and occurring after t2 (in their world). None of these states is psychologically continuous with any of Mary's actually existing states. Thus it is hard to see how Kaufman's consideration of the notion of psychological continuity might show that one could not have been born earlier (though one could have died later).\(^8\)

Kaufman maintains that when one imagines a possible world distinct from the actual world in which one's genetic material comes into existence earlier than when it actually does, this may be relevant to the question of 'metaphysical personal identity', the question of whether the same person exists in distinct possible worlds [p. 308] But "metaphysical personal identity" is "of little interest in the context of . . . death" and one's concern about it, according to Kaufman. This is because,

apparently it is possible to have metaphysical personal identity without psychological continuity [in virtue of Kripkean reasons], and it is psychological continuity that concerns us in discussions of death. [p. 304]

The foregoing discussion has shown, though, that in comparing Mary's earlier birth with her later death, we need to consider possible worlds distinct from the actual world, ones that contain Mary and various merely possible, non-actual psychological states that differ

\(^6\) So, on this view, \(e\) itself, and not some counterpart to it, figures in the possible world pertinent to the evaluation of such a modal claim about an individual. This view is the denial of the counterpart approach to modal discourse developed by David Lewis. See, for example, his \textit{On the Plurality of Worlds} (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986). None of the claims in this paper depends upon affirming or denying Lewis' counterpart theory.

\(^7\) No merely possible, non-actual psychological states is psychologically connected with any actually existing state by any of the causal relations distinct from the memory relation that are discussed in the text.

\(^8\) Thanks to an anonymous referee for forcing us to clarify the points in the last two paragraphs.
from her actual ones (that might have existed, but never did in fact exist). This takes us straight into 'metaphysical personal identity' territory. Comparing Mary's earlier birth with her later death takes us, at the same time, straight away from the actual-world relations of psychological continuity that make it the case that the members of M constitute Mary's actual history.

To put the point slightly differently, the concept of psychological continuity, as it is standardly used in the analysis of personal identity, applies to psychological states and person stages within a single possible world. According to the psychological approach to personal identity, Mary persists through time (in a given possible world W) in virtue of the psychological continuity holding between various temporally distinct psychological states (occurring in W). When we turn to modal questions concerning what could have been the case for Mary, we leave psychological continuity behind and take up the question of 'metaphysical personal identity'.

Kaufman holds that whereas Mary could have died later, she could not have been born earlier. So far, we have seen that this claim is not supported by considerations centering on the role of psychological continuity in personal identity through time. We will conclude by discussing a related idea of Kaufman's. He holds that in imagining Mary's later death, we simply imagine additions to M, the sequence of stages containing Mary's actual psychological states. In view of the foregoing discussion, what we imagine is a possible world W1 containing Mary (or a counterpart thereof), the psychological states involved in M (or counterparts thereof), and ten years' worth of merely possible, non-actual psychological states occurring later than t2 that are (from the standpoint of W1) psychologically continuous with the states involved in M (or counterparts thereof). But, Kaufman would say, we cannot imagine a possible world W2 containing Mary (or a counterpart thereof) and the states involved in M (or counterparts thereof),9 in which we add merely possible states occurring earlier than t1 that are (from the standpoint of W2) psychologically continuous with the states involved in M (or counterparts thereof). Why not? Presumably this is because Mary's actually existing psychological states contain, for example, no memories of pre-t1 states. Thus in any world W* in which the states in M (or counterparts thereof) exist, these states will contain no W* memories of pre-t1, W* psychological states.10

---

9 When we say that states are psychologically continuous from the standpoint of some non-actual possible world (such as W1), we mean that the states might have been psychologically continuous, though they are not in fact psychologically continuous.

10 An anonymous referee pointed out a possible constraint on 'adding' pre-t1 states to M (or to a series consisting of counterparts of the members of M). If we apply a Davidsonian conception of event-individuation to experiences, then any possible world (such as W2) containing an experience e figuring in M (or a counterpart thereof) must also contain all the actual causes of e (or counterparts thereof). One might then wonder whether the experiences 'added' in constructing W2 are psychologically continuous (from the standpoint of W2) with the M-experiences occurring in W2 (or the counterparts thereof). It seems that we could, though, in constructing W2, hold fixed M and the causes of the experiences figuring in M while 'adding' pre-t1 experiences together with, e.g., post-t1 memories of them. (If you wish, please restate the previous sentence in counterpart-theoretic terms.) This would insure that the 'added' pre-t1 stages are psychologically continuous (from the standpoint of W2) with the appropriate post-t1 stages. As will emerge in the rest of the paper, we do not think that in imagining a world in which Mary is born earlier, we need to hold fixed the members of M and 'add' earlier experiences. (Again, please find the appropriate counterpart-theoretic parsing of the previous sentence if this seems desirable.)
But none of this shows that Mary could not have been born earlier. It seems that there is no bar to imagining a genuinely possible world containing Mary (or a counterpart thereof) equipped with psychological states other than those in M (or other than counterparts of those in M). It is not essential to Mary that she have the psychological states involved in M. Surely she could have had New Jersey-based experiences during the period t₁-t₂ that differ from those in M, say, in virtue of changing her place of residence. In imagining Mary's possibilities, we are not constrained to hold fixed the psychological states in M (or to consider counterparts of those states). If there is a possible world in which Mary has psychological states differing from those in M during the period t₁-t₂ (or differing from their counterparts), then it seems reasonable to hold that there is a possible world in which Mary has states differing from those in M prior to that period (or differing from their counterparts).¹¹

What are the constraints on imagining what is possible for Mary? This is a vexed question, which we do not propose to investigate here. Our chief concern has been to argue that Kaufman has given no reason to think that Mary could not have been born earlier.¹²

¹¹ Further, it is plausible to suppose that in imagining Mary's possibilities, we are not constrained to hold fixed even a single state figuring in M (or a single counterpart thereof). Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing our attention to this.

¹² Our own solution to the problem for the deprivation account proceeds from the claim that it is rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward past and future pleasures. (See our 'Why Is Death Bad?') All other things being equal, one has a rational preference for pleasure in the future over pleasure in the past. This preference emerges in thought experiments with the following structure. Imagine two possible worlds in which one lives a life of seventy years, each life containing the same amount of pleasure and the same amount of pain, distributed roughly equally throughout the seventy year spans. In the first world, one's life begins in 1950, while in the second, it begins in 1970. One is asked, "Would you prefer to be at a 1999 New Year's Eve Party in the first world, or in the second?" The rational answer seems obvious.

So even though it is true that in considering prenatal and postmortem times, there is the 'same amount of infinity, rolling out in all directions', it is the future infinite blank that deprives us of what we care most about.